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JOSEPH THE PROVIDER



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PRELUDE IN THE UPPER CIRCLES

IN the upper circles of the hierarchy at this time there was felt, as always on such occasions, a mild yet poignant satisfaction, an agreeable sly sense of "I told you so," expressed in glances from under lowered lashes and round little mouths discreetly drawn down.

Once again had the cup run over; once more had patience been exhausted, justice fallen due; and quite against His own wish or will, under pressure from the Kingdom of the Stern (which, in any case, the world was unable to resist, since One had never succeeded in making it stand up on the unstable and yielding foundations of sheer mercy and compassion), He, the Almighty, in majestic affliction had seen Himself driven to step in and clean up; to overturn, to destroy, and only after that to even off again — as it had been at the time of the Flood and on the day of the rain of fire and brimstone, when the Salt Sea had swallowed up the wicked cities.

This time, of course, the concession to justice was not on such an appalling scale as in that earlier attack of remorse and the ensuing wholesale drownings. It did not compare with that other occasion when, thanks to the perverted sense of beauty of the people of Sodom, an un-

speaking city tax had almost been exacted from two of us. No, this time it was not all mankind that had fallen into the pit; nor even some portion of it, the corruption of whose ways had cried to heaven. This was a matter of but one single specimen of the breed, albeit an uncommonly taking and self-complacent one, more than usually well equipped with the advantages of nepotism and long-standing design in his favour. And we had had our noses rubbed into him on account of a whim, a train of thought, only too familiar to the heavenly host, where it was the source of much bitterness, though also of the not unjustified hope that very soon the shoe would be on the other foot and the bitterness the portion of him who had set the train of thought in motion. "The Angels," so ran the train of thought, "are created after Our image, but yet not fruitful. The beasts, on the other hand, lo, they are fruitful, but not after Our likeness. Let Us create man — an image of the angels, yet fruitful withal!"

Fantastic. Worse than merely futile, it was far-fetched, extravagant, pregnant with remorse and bitterness. We were not "fruitful," not we! We were courtiers of the light, sober-minded chamberlains one and all; the story about our one-time going in unto the children of men was simply irresponsible gossip. But everything considered, and whatever interesting advantages the animal quality of fecundity might prove to have over and above its animality, at all events we "unfruitful ones" did not drink injustice like water, and One should see how far One would get with One's notions about fruitful angels: perhaps far enough to see that an Almighty with self-control and prudent forethought for His own peace of

mind might better let matters rest once and for all at our decent and honourable form of existence.

Unlimited power, unlimited possibility of taking into one's head, producing out of it, and bringing into being by a mere "Let there be" — such gifts had, of course, their dangers. Even All-Wisdom might not be quite adequate to avoid all the blunders and waste motions in the practice of absolute qualities like these. Out of sheer restlessness and lack of exercise; out of the purest "much wants more"; out of a capricious craving to see, after the angel and the brute, what a combination of the two would be like; out of all these motives, and impelled by them, One entangled Oneself in folly and created a being notoriously unstable and embarrassing. And then, precisely because it was such an undeniable miscreation, One set One's heart upon it in magnificent self-will and made such a point of the thing that all heaven was offended.

Now, was it true that He had come on this idea all by Himself and of His own accord? Speculations to the contrary were rife in the hierarchy, albeit only in whispers and not susceptible of proof. Plausible, however, they were; and according to them the whole thing went back to a suggestion made by the great Shemmael, who at that time, before his luminous fall from on high, had stood very near the Throne. The idea sounded very like him — and why, forsooth? Because it was his business to realize and bring into the world evil, his very own thought, which nobody else either knew or cared about, and because the enrichment of the world's repertory through evil could be achieved in no other way than just precisely by the creation of man. Among the fruitful animal creation evil,

Shemmael's great invention, did not come into question, and certainly not among us unfruitful images of God. For it to come into the world, there was needed just the very creature which Shemmael, according to the hypothesis, had proposed: an image of God, which at the same time was fruitful — in other words, man. It did not necessarily follow that the Almighty had been hoodwinked. Shemmael, in his usual grandiose way, had probably not concealed the consequences of the proposed creation — in other words, the origin of evil — but had come out quite forthright and forcibly with it, though in our circles we guessed that he also said a lot about how much livelier it would make life for the Creator: for instance by the need to exercise mercy and pity, judgment and correction. Or by the appearance in the world of merit and demerit, reward and punishment — in other words, by the origin of the Good, a phenomenon bound up with that of Evil. The Good, indeed, had actually had to depend upon its opposite, waiting for existence in the limbo of the merely possible; thus it was clear that creation rested upon division, which had even begun simultaneously with the separation of light from darkness, and the All-power would only be consistent in going on from this exterior position to create the moral world.

The view was widespread in the hierarchy that this had been the argument by which the great Shemmael had flattered the Throne and won it over to his counsels — highly malicious counsels they were, of course; one could not help sniggering at their slyness, however much it had been disguised by the rude frankness the malice clothed itself in. With that malice, it must be said, the upper circles did not altogether lack sympathy. The core of Shem-

mael's malice lay here: if the beasts, though possessing the gift of fruitfulness, were not created in God's image we of the hierarchy were not either, strictly speaking, since that property, God be praised, we were clean of. Now the properties of godlikeness and fruitfulness which we divided between our two groups were originally united in the Creator Himself and thus the new creation suggested by Shemmael would be the only one actually and literally after the Creator's own image. With this being, then — in other words, man — evil came into the world.

That was a joke to make anyone snigger. The very creature which if you like was nearer to the image of the Creator than any other brought evil with him into the world. Thus God on Shemmael's advice created for Himself a mirror which was anything but flattering. Often and often in anger and chagrin He was moved to smash it to bits — though He never quite did, perhaps because He could not bring Himself to replunge into nothingness that which He had summoned forth and actually cared more about the failure of than He did about any success. Perhaps too He would not admit that anything could be a complete failure after He had created it so thoroughgoingly in His own image. Perhaps, finally, a mirror is a means of learning about oneself; and He was later to be confronted, in a son of man, a certain Abiram or Abraham, by the consciousness of that equivocal creature as a means to His own self-knowledge.

Man, then, was a result of God's curiosity about Himself. Shemmael had shrewdly divined the curiosity and had exploited it in his advice. Vexation and chagrin had been the inevitable and lasting effect — especially in the by no means rare cases where evil was united with bold

intelligence, logic, and pugnacity, as it was in Cain. The story of the first fratricide and his conversation with God after the deed was known in some detail to the upper circles and industriously circulated. God had not come off very well when He asked Eve's son: "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand." For Cain had answered: "Yes, I have slain my brother and it is all very sad. But who created me as I am, jealous to that extent that under provocation my whole bearing is changed and I no longer know what I am doing? Art not Thou a jealous God, and hast Thou not created me after Thy image? Who put in me the evil impulse to the deed which I undeniably committed? Thou sayest that Thou alone bearest the whole world and wilt not bear our sins?" Not so bad. Quite as if Cain or Cajin had taken counsel beforehand with Shemrael, though probably the hotheaded rascal had needed no advice. Rejoinder would not have been easy. There could be only bitter laughter or a crushing blow. "Get out!" was what He had said. "Go thy ways! A fugitive and vagabond shalt thou be, but I will make thee a sign that thou belongest to Me and no one may slay thee." In short, Cain, thanks to his logic, came off better than unscathed; there could be no talk at all of punishment. Even that about the fugitive and vagabond was not serious: Cain settled in the land of Nod, eastward of Eden, and in peace and quiet begot his children, a work for which he was urgently needed.

At other times, as is well known, punishment descended, frightfulness was invoked, there was majestic affliction at the compromising conduct of the "most like" creature.

Again there were rewards, extravagant rewards: we need only recall Hanok or Enoch and the incredible, between ourselves the quite irresponsible benefits that fell into the fellow's lap. In the circles and ranks the view was held — and cautiously passed about — that in the world below there was great lack of even-handed justice; that the moral world established by Shemmael's advice was not dealt with in a properly serious spirit. It did not need much, there were times when it needed nothing at all, to convince the hierarchy that Shemmael took the moral world much more seriously than He did.

It could not be disguised, even where it ought to have been, that the rewards, disproportionate as they were in some cases, were actually only a sort of rationalization of blessings which at bottom were nothing but an arbitrary playing of favourites, with almost no moral aspect at all. And the punishments? Well, for instance, just now in Egypt punishment and reduction to the ranks were taking place: there was compliance, apparently painful and reluctant, with the dictates of the moral world. A certain dashing and arrogant young darling, a dreamer of dreams, a scion of that stock which had hit on the idea of being a medium of self-knowledge to God, had come down to the pit, to the prison and the grave, and for the second time, because his folly had passed all bounds and he had let love — as before he had hate — get entirely out of hand. But we onlookers, perhaps we were deceiving ourselves in our satisfaction at this particular version of the fire and brimstone?

Just between ourselves we were not being deceived, at bottom not for a moment. We knew precisely or we accurately guessed that all this severity was for the benefit of

the Kingdom of the Stern; that He was using the punishment, the instrument of the moral world, to break open a closed alley which had but one and that an underground exit to the light; that He — with all due respect — was perverting the punishment into a means of further elevation and favour. When we, in passing, made little O-shaped mouths with the corners drawn down, and shot little glances from under our eyelids, we did so because we saw through the whole thing. Disgrace as a vehicle to greater honour — the All-Highest's little game illuminated the past as well and shed light on the follies and flippancies which had given cause for punishment and "forced" Him to inflict it. And this light did not come from the moral world; for these earlier failings, from wherever and whomever inspired, God knew, were also revealed as a medium and vehicle to new, extravagant exaltations.

In our circles we were convinced that we knew more or less about these devices, partaking as we did, to however limited an extent, in the Creator's all-knowledge: though even so, out of respect, we could make use of our knowledge only with the greatest caution, self-restraint, and dissimulation. In the merest whisper it might and should be added that the hierarchy thought it knew still more — of matters, steps, undertakings, intentions, manœuvres, secrets of the widest scope which it would have been wrong to brush aside as mere court gossip. There could be no mention, scarcely even so much as a whisper, and all that happened was the next thing to keeping silent: the slightest movement of lips just slightly curled, and that was all. What sort of matters were these, what were the rumours?

They had to do, of course, quite without comment, with this business of reward and punishment — with the whole complex question of favour, predilection, election, which had been raised with the birth of the moral world, the twin birth of Good and Evil. It had to do, further, with the not entirely authoritative but well-founded news, conveyed by all these barely moving lips, that Shemmael's counsel, his suggestion that God should create the "most like" creature — in other words, man; that this had not been the last piece of advice he had bestowed upon the Throne; that the relation between the latter and the fallen one had never been entirely severed or else at some later time had been resumed, no one knew how. Perhaps behind the backs of His court He had undertaken a journey to the Pit and there indulged in an exchange of ideas. Perhaps the exile, perhaps more than once, had found a way to leave his own place and speak again before the Throne. In any case he had clearly been in a position to continue his exposition, so cleverly seasoned by surprising candour, and to support it with fresh advice, which, however, as before, did not go deeper than to stimulate ideas already present and only requiring further persuasion.

In order to understand what was going on, we have to recall certain dates and facts which form the premise and prelude of our present story. I refer to that psychological soul-novel which was earlier the subject of discussion: that romance of the soul of man — primitive man — which, as formless matter, was from the very first one of the fixed premises, its "Fall" being the conditioned basis of everything that followed. We might perhaps use the word "creation"; for surely the sin consisted in that the soul, out of a sort of melancholy sensuality surprising

and shocking in a primitive principle proper to the higher world, let itself yield to a craving to penetrate in love matter which was formless and obstinately clung to its lack of form, for the purpose of calling up out of it forms through which it could compass fleshly desire. Surely it was the Highest who came to the rescue of the soul in that wrestling for love which was far beyond its power. He thereupon created the world, where things happen and can be told, the world of forms, the world of death. This He did out of sympathy for the straits of His erring partner and fellow fixed conditions. We may therefore even infer an affinity between them. If such an inference is to be drawn, we must not neglect to draw it, even if it sound impudent or blasphemous to speak in the same breath of error and weakness.

May we associate the idea of error with Him? A resounding No can be the only answer to such a question; it was in fact the answer of all the heavenly host, accompanied, of course, by that same discreet twist of all the little mouths. It would doubtless be going too far, it would be hasty, to consider that the Creator's tender and helpful pity for the erring was the same thing as error itself. That would be premature, because through the creation of the finite life-and-death world of form no least violence was done to the dignity, spirituality, majesty, or absoluteness of a God who existed before and beyond the world. And thus up to now one could not speak seriously of error in any full or actual sense of the word. It was different with the ideas, plans, and desires which were now supposed to be in the air, the subject of private conversations with Shemael. The latter, of course, pretended to be presenting the Throne in all good faith with a perfectly new

idea; whereas he was most likely quite aware that He was already more or less occupied with the very same one. Obviously Shemmael trusted to the widespread though mistaken belief that when two people hit on the same idea it must be a good one.

It is futile to go on beating round the bush. What the great Shemmael proposed, one hand on his chin, the other stretched in eloquent peroration toward the Throne, was the corporealization of the Most High, His embodiment in a chosen people not yet born but to be created. The idea was based on the model of other gods on this earth: folk and tribal gods, mighty in magic, full of fleshly vitality and energy. The word "vitality" is well chosen; for the chief argument of the Pit, just as at the time of the creation, was that the spiritual, the above-and-beyond-the-world Creator would experience a great accession of vitality by following Shemmael's advice — only in a much more thoroughgoing and distinctly more fleshly sense. This, I say, was the chief argument: for the clever Pit had many more, and with more or less justice he assumed that all of them were already at work in the theatre of God's mind and only needed to be brought forward and stressed.

The field of the emotions to which they addressed themselves was ambition. It was ambition, certainly, towards degradation, ambition directed downwards; for in the case of the Highest, where there can be no striving upwards, there is only the other direction left. It was an ambition to mingle, a craving to be like the rest, a desire to stop being unusual. Nothing easier than for the Pit to harp on a certain sense of futility, a frustrating vagueness and universality which God must feel when He, a spir-